

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. CHARLES A. GONZALEZ

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 30, 2001

Mr. GONZALEZ. Mr. Speaker, on rollcall no. 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407.

Had I been present, I would have voted 400—no; 401—no; 402—yes; 403—yes; 404—no; 405—yes; 406—yes; 407—yes.

SIKHS ASKED TO REMOVE TURBANS AT AIRPORT, TURBAN IS RELIGIOUS SYMBOL AND MUST NOT BE REMOVED

HON. EDOLPHUS TOWNS

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 30, 2001

Mr. TOWNS. Mr. Speaker, there have been more incidents in which Sikh men were asked to remove their turbans at an airport. Dr. Gurmit Singh Aulakh, President of the Council of Khalistan, has brought these to my attention.

Satpal Singh Kohli was about to board a Southwest Airlines flight from Albuquerque to Los Angeles when members of the ground crew demanded that he remove his turban. He told the ground crew that his Sikh religion required him to wear the turban and he could not remove it. The ground crew insisted that he remove his turban. He needed to get to Los Angeles to be with his ailing father. When the agents would not budge, Mr. Kohli demanded to see their supervisor. He was told that if he had a complaint, he should contact customer service.

The agents not only searched his turban in full view of other passengers, they searched his unshorn hair—required by his religion—as well. Mr. Kohli said that “In my whole life I have never been humiliated like this.” The agents had only told him that they wanted to search his bag, not his turban or hair. Yet they never checked his bag.

Last Saturday, Tejinder Singh Kahlon, a sitting judge in New York, was asked to remove his turban at a New York airport. He refused. He was not allowed to board his plane. He called the media to report his harassment by the airport security personnel.

The turban is a symbol of the Sikh religion, to which Mr. Kohli and Judge Kahlon belong. It is religiously mandated. They are required to carry five symbols. Unshorn hair covered by a turban is one of these. More than 99 percent of the people in this country who wear turbans are Sikhs. Turbans should not be removed and searched.

Linda Rutherford, a spokeswoman for Southwest Airlines, admitted that the incident had to do with “passenger profiling” and claimed that the rules had to do either with what a passenger wears or what he looks like, but she blamed the Federal Aviation Administration for these new rules. If that is true, the FAA should be ashamed of themselves. They have institutionalized racial profiling as a part of their antiterrorism policy. If it is the airline's own policy, then decent Americans should flood Southwest Airlines' headquarters with protests.

We must not allow racial, religious, or ethnic profiling. The airport ground crews should be prohibited from stopping Sikh passengers and searching their religiously-mandated turbans. This kind of discrimination is never acceptable. I ask Attorney General Ashcroft and Secretary of Transportation Mineta to look into this matter and stop this harassment of Sikh Americans immediately.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to place an India-West article on the Kohli incident into the RECORD for the information of my colleagues.

[From India-West, Oct. 26, 2001]

SIKH ASKED TO HAND OVER TURBAN BEFORE BOARDING PLANE

(By Viji Sundaram)

Satpal Singh Kohli was about to board a Southwest Airlines flight from Albuquerque, N.M., to Los Angeles Oct. 22, when ground crew at the security gate demanded that he hand over his turban to them before he enplaned. When Kohli protested, telling them that as a Sikh his religion forbade him from baring his head in public, the agents insisted that he do as he was told. Kohli said that they told him that he would have to fly minus his turban, which would be returned to him at the Los Angeles airport. Kohli said he told them that he had flown Southwest from Los Angeles to Albuquerque just two days earlier and “my turban wasn't an issue then.” He also told them that he had to make that flight because his elderly father, who was home alone in Los Angeles, needed to be given medication and may even need to be hospitalized.

When Kohli realized he was getting nowhere with the agents, he asked to see their supervisor. He said he was told that if he had a complaint, he should call customer service. Kohli said in a e-mail he sent to India-West. The agents told him that if he wanted to make that flight, he would have to submit to a complete turban and hair search.

Because of his father's medical condition, Kohli said he reluctantly agreed, but requested that it be done in a private area, out of view of the other passengers. Kohli said the agents told him there was no private area and that the search would be done at the security area behind the counter.

He said an agent not only searched his turban thoroughly in full view of the other passengers and ground staff, she also searched his hair, before allowing him to board the plane.

“My sentiments were hurt,” Kohli said. “In my whole life I have never been humiliated like this.”

Kohli said that in pulling him over for a check, the agent had told him he needed to have his bag searched, not his turban or his hair. Yet, after searching his turban and hair, they waved him through, without checking his carry-on bag, according to Kohli, who works as a travel agent.

When he arrived in Los Angeles, Kohli said he went to Southwest's customer service center and told the two men there—the customer service supervisor and station manager—about what he had been put through. Both men, as well as the captain of the plane who happened to stop by, agreed that turban searches were not a part of the new security requirements, Kohli said. He said they apologized for what had happened.

Called for a comment, Linda Rutherford, a Southwest Airlines spokeswoman in its corporate headquarters in Dallas, Texas, told India-West that following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on America, there has been some new Federal Aviation Administration-mandated procedures “regarding passenger profiling.” She said she was not aware of the Kohli incident, but noted that “if a pas-

senger had been flagged as a selectee, there would have been additional security checks.” She said she was not sure if those additional checks are triggered by what a passenger wears or what he or she looks like.

“Certainly, it could be a bit awkward for passengers to have their personal belongings searched in front of other passengers,” Rutherford acknowledged, adding: “It is certainly not our intent to embarrass our passengers.” Manjit Singh, executive director of the Maryland-based Sikh Media Watch and Resource Task Force, told India-West that since the Sept. 11 attacks, his organization has received at least a dozen complaints similar to Kohli's. “We are very disturbed by what's happening,” Singh said.

He said his group plans to meet with Norm Mineta, Secretary of Transportation, as well as with FAA officials to make them aware of what was happening. “A Sikh should never be forced to remove his turban,” Singh said. “It's a religiously mandated headdress.”

He said turban searches should only be done if the metal detector beeps. Security agents, he said, should first do an electronic check, then pat down the turban if they suspect something, and only as a last resort should they ask the passenger to remove his turban.

Since Sept. 11, Sikhs nationwide have become targets of hate crimes in the U.S., as people misidentify them as Taliban supporters because of their beards and turbans. A number of them have in recent weeks reportedly set aside their turbans and concealed their tresses under baseball caps.

TRIBUTE TO MRS. VIRGINIA MCNEIL

HON. HAROLD E. FORD, JR.

OF TENNESSEE

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 30, 2001

Mr. FORD. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to extend well-deserved recognition to Mrs. Virginia McNeil of Memphis as she is named Elementary School Principal for the year 2001 by the Tennessee Principals' Study Council.

A hands-on educator with varied experiences and an abiding devotion to her profession, Mrs. Virginia McNeil has rendered distinguished service as an elementary school teacher, assistant principal and as an instructional supervisor for the System-Wide Achievement Team of Memphis City Schools; however, the defining position of Mrs. McNeil's career has been her productive tenure as the principal of Alton Elementary school, a position she has held since August 1988.

With a powerful determination and an expressed concern for each student, Principal McNeil has worked tirelessly to implement school reform, inspire students to achieve, encourage professional development for teachers and involve parents and community leaders in the everyday operation of this school. In the midst of her work, she also has been the impetus behind the creation of the school's strong sense of “internal community.” The collective attitude of the faculty and staff has been one which has encouraged support and collaboration. This has been extremely important given the fact that Mrs. McNeil has shepherded a staff that has consistently contained